

# The Masquerader

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Category: Thor

Genre: Adventure, Family

Language: English

Characters: Loki, Thor

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-04-08 06:49:38

Updated: 2016-04-13 04:17:44

Packaged: 2016-04-27 20:56:33

Rating: T

Chapters: 2

Words: 2,837

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: Asgard fell and Ascent rose when Ragnorak occurred over ten years ago. Since then, things have become rather simple. No one lies, no one cheats, no one betrays anyone else; All the fallen gods and goddesses do is drink, bicker, then drink some more. But Astrid Dorr CrystalArmorer is about to change all that. All at the age of ten and in the span of six days.. Or burn alive trying.

## 1. The Start of Misfortune

Astrid's hair was very, VERY black. Which reasonably meant, of course, that most everyone wanted her to be very, VERY dead. And, according to the leather worker on Silver Alley, such an event should occur very, VERY soon if there was any justice in the world. When the world decidedly displayed a lack of said 'justice', the people of Ascent were more than pleased to take matters into their own hands.

The Barkeep of Coal, for instance, was hailed as QUITE the hero for a great amount of time after he slipped Fyre's Bite into a drink he served Astrid upon the occasion of her eighth year of life. Further, the Healers of Platinum were regarded as saints and divinities when they collectively refused to treat the effects of the poisoning, leaving the child to drown in her own blackening blood.

The cure was simple, it rested within a herb that grew as common as a weed within the gardens of Platinum. Such a plant was produced in surplus after the effect of Fyre's Bite became well known throughout Ascent. It was an unspeakably terrible poison, with a cruel and drawn out end. The poison itself tore holes within the victim's throat and lungs, which grew wider with every rasping breath until, at the end of the week, the victim drowned in their own blackening blood.

The Healers of Platinum proclaimed that such a poison was deserving of such a vile child.

The people of Ascent were so enamored with the idea of Astrid not surviving the week after the poisoning that adults and children alike openly wept in the streets when Astrid was miraculously healed.

\_It's magic\_, they cursed and spat, \_The weapon of traitors. The work of demons.\_

It didn't help matters that Astrid's unluckiness was that of legend material.

Having the opportunity for her appearance to take after two parents; Itheia, a beautiful, bright blonde woman with brown eyes the color of amber tree sap, and Ynir, a tall, menacing looking man who held an uncanny resemblance to the notorious traitor, Loki. Astrid had had the glorious misfortune to look as much like her father as his own reflection did. Excepting, of course, his tall stature and his stubbled chin.

Astrid found that could weave her waist long hair into the latest fashions until the sun fell from the sky, it didn't change the fact that the strands were as black as the night. Nor did such an action change the fact that her bright blue eyes appeared to constantly be 'plotting something vile'. Not even slightly did such an action tamper with the evidence of her crooked smile that resembled 'something terribly evil getting its way'. Or, that her laughter reflected strongly upon her 'malicious intent'.

But Astrid DID get very good at trying to weave her silk hair into the latest fashions to erase these facts. Her long black hair was constantly coiled down her back in a curling, tight braid tied with deft fingertips as a result of such attempts.

Astrid came to suppose that the people of Ascent had perfectly reasonable reason to believe her to be a bad omen. To be some foreshadowing of something terrible to come. After all, so many adults couldn't be wrong upon one single subject, surely.

As if her appearance wasn't unfortunate enough for a single person's lifetime, there was, in addition, the matter of her cravings. Astrid couldn't recall much in her days of sickness from the Fyre's Bite, particularly closer towards the end of the week when Death was striding in. But she could recall pieces of an interesting encounter that had perked her fascination, even in her delusional state. As much as a bad omen for others as it was to entertain HER interest.

There'd been a woman, that much Astrid could puzzle through the distorted, blurred images. A woman named Tea. This woman had entered the tent of the Healers of Platinum holding a single, steaming cup of oddly delicious smelling tea, informing Ynir that he could stop threatening the 'short minded, superstitious, stupid, shoe-faced and every other insult starting with 's' ' healers, for she held the cure to Fyre's Bite. Despite the fact that the Healers of Platinum held the only keys to the garden that contained the cure.

'This won't fix the damage they've done,' Tea had said, lowering herself to rest beside the coughing child with pity painting across her features, what an odd expression it was! 'There isn't enough of the Golden Apple left They don't grow them anymore. But this'll cure

you. Mostly.'

All that Astrid could recall further, was that the tea was of a golden shade, and tasted sweeter and more satisfying than anything Astrid had tasted before. The mere memory of the drink soured everything Astrid tasted in comparison, and the day after Astrid asked Ynir of golden apples. Ynir, she could remember as much, had grinned as if recalling an old memory, wondering how such things had fallen into the hands of women named after drinks briefly aloud before informing Astrid she was to forget such things entirely.

She found that she couldn't.

As the Tailor of Iron so gladly informed Astrid when she overheard Astrid ask Tea later the week, Golden Apples were once the fruit of the Gods and Goddesses.

The kind that destroyed the world.

The evil ones.

Misfortune continued to smile upon Astrid's fate as bad luck spun its way collectively throughout her life. Particularly in the subject of nature.

Astrid found herself drawn to the beauty the natural world produced without a second thought, as if magnificence itself were nothing but a beautiful happenstance. Awed, at a younger age, Astrid often found herself tucked comfortably away between the great, stretching roots of the willow tree that crested the proudest of the hills bordering Ascent. With the wind curling through her loose hair, and the open grass crinkling beneath her feet, Astrid felt, as she described later to Ynir when he accused her of such actions, 'As if I can finally breath.'

Nature, to the people of Ascent, was disorderly and chaotic. Which, of course, marked the entire subject as evil, and any who disagreed with such were inhabited by the demons that infested the world below, known as Descent. As such, Ynir forbade her from leaving the tight confines of the judgmental city of Ascent. No matter the temptation.

Choking upon the stale air of Ascent, Astrid found herself yearning desperately to return to the open, rolling hills one single more time. How she craved to dash about freely, in the open wind, without fear of judgement, death or mislabellings! As traitorous as the desire was.

But it was a STUBBORN thing.

And it simply wouldn't disappear.

Not even a week later, Astrid's resolve slipped upon the ice it strode upon, and she found herself once more at the welcome roots of the great willow tree. Only now, its open, warm branches warned of danger and madness, and not of forgotten tales and lullabies.

That was the day that the children of Ascent decided to play a new game, one appropriately named as 'The Gallow's Game'. The rules were simple, a noose was dropped around Astrid's throat, the rope was

looped over the highest branch of the willow tree, and the players each took turns pulling on the end of the rope until Astrid's feet left the ground, and the breath left her conniving throat.

The most exciting part of the game came after Astrid's small hands ceased clutching uselessly at the rope and directly after the life deserted her deceptive gaze.

The branch the rope had been secured to snapped, dropping Astrid's limp body to the ground with a loud crash. After kicking the unbreathing body, and concluding it dead, the children skipped off to their parents with glee, vaunting their achievement with recounts of various demons arising to the occasion of Astrid's death, supposedly summoned by her own hellish word as she was strung up.

When Astrid came to, she raspily offered the willow her thanks.

And she could have sworn it breathed a response.

The people of Ascent despised music nearly as much as they despised nature. Music, they proclaimed, was laden with demons, madness, and disgusting rebellion. It was the muck that absorbed the sanity of the clear minded. Music was, in their teachings, the stitches that bound insanity together.

So it was just Astrid's luck that the stars themselves insistently burst into song when Astrid was nearby. Which was, unfortunately, extremely often.

The stars had always been Astrid's eternal companions, ever since she was a squalling infant, Ynir claimed. He couldn't explain where they came from, and quite simply, never tried. The perfectly round spheres gleamed with light as they zipped about the place, spiralling without end around Astrid's young form as she grew through the years. Her eternal, doting companions.

They were, despite their mischievous tendency to play not only music, but the ODDEST of selections of the subject, often a comfort. A reminder of an older time, one wracked with madness, chaos, lies and such evils, certainly. But still, an older time that adored laughter, nature, music, and dancing.

Oh.. Dancing..

The public of Ascent, however, did not share this interest and gladly added the sin of her interest in such meaningless, chaos laden activities as the mark of a demon. Even a young one.

It really didn't help that Astrid was marked as a Magic-user. Remarkably quite obviously too.

And she wasn't even a particularly good one.

The Drifting was as much a curse upon her as it was for the rest of Ascent. After all..

It wasn't like she could control it.

## 2. Trust My Rage

"Fead! Fead Sorr!" Astrid's rasped voice rose with joy as it twisted through the howling winds that wailed across the rolling hills just to the south of Ascent's tallest walls. Over her chest, the young child wore a thin, lightweighted cloth of a deeply black shade. The shirt bore thin sleeves at the top of her shoulders about the width of one of her tiny fingers, and was pinched at the center of the chest by a single golden bead the size of one's thumbprint.

The bottom of the shirt was tucked loosely into the top of her pants, which, being black in shade as well, snugly clung to her legs until they met their end; clasped tightly over the heels of her bare feet. As the excited child ran, an aged chain fidgetted around her neck, rather displeased that its pendant was lost beneath the fabric of Astrid's shirt.

Astrid's lank form bounded over the rise of a particularly steep hill. Or, at least, it started to, before stopping half way up to pant, gasp for air, and scold the wind bitterly for its particularly cold bite this morning.

"Fead, you're-" Astrid started breathlessly before giving up and letting out a thin breath, bending forward slightly as she clutched her aching lungs with chilled fingers, "You're-" She attempted once more, only to be interrupted soundly with a bone rattling cough. Shaking her head, Astrid shot herself a dry, sarcastic grin before she rose, wiping the blackened blood's drops from her spread lips with a hand before tilting her face to the warm sun as she breathed deep lungfuls of the crisp morning air.

The gusts of the immense height of Ascent, the newest city in the sky, roared past Astrid with a playful vengeance, teasing her waist long black hair from its intricate braidings as it dashed past in a mad game. Twirling upon its heel, the gale sprinted through Astrid with a smug sort of smile playing upon its whispering breath.

"You're going to \_adore\_ what the stars have told me, Fead!" Astrid promised cockily, her voice slicing through the howling air with a restored power. "The insistant little buggers have finally told me something \_important\_!"

Offended, the gleaming stars of glittering gold dashed from their perch within Astrid's twisted hair, throwing themselves before her blue eyes in aggravation. "Hush! Not yet!" Astrid scolded with a hiss, waving the blasted things away in annoyance. Heaving a melodramatic string quartet of violins in depression, the stars darted back to the safety of Astrid's braid, stringing themselves in her dark hair sulkily.

"Hey.. Fead?" Astrid's brow furrowed as she stepped cautiously up the hillside, "Where are you?" Astrid's crooked grin twitched downwards in concern. Fead \_always\_ \_met\_ her around here.

And he was \_never\_ \_late\_.

The sound of children's laughter filled the air chillingly, freezing Astrid where she stood and gripping her heart firmly with a painful, crippling fear as haunting memories flooded through her mind unwillingly.

\_Gasping, and choking, Astrid clutched at the fraying rope at her neck as her toes skirted upon the damp soil. "I'm not- I'm not evil!" Astrid begged desperately, pleadingly catching the gaze of the line of children eagerly waiting for their turn to pull at the end of the dangling rope.\_

\_"\_\_Liar!" They sang.\_

\_"\_\_Evil thing!" They taunted.\_

\_"\_\_Traitor!" They laughed.\_

\_"\_\_Evil thing!" They chanted.\_

\_"\_\_Beast!" They grinned.\_

\_"\*\*"\*\_\*\_\*Evil thing!"\*\*\*\_

Astrid bolted.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOo

"Let's play a game, Satyr!" The crowd of children challenged, sneering at the wide eyed boy standing at the ring of their confining circle. "You \_will\_ play with us, won't you?" The little blonde girls giggled sweetly as the larger boys intimidatingly stepped forward, stretching their growing frames absently as they grinned happily with a menacing gaze that clearly read that it was \_not \_a request.

"Let's play The Gallows Game!" One of the blonde girls declared, beaming happily at the idea, "We've already seen one Satyr **\*\*burn\*\***. Let's see his son **\*\*hang\*\***!"

Fead swallowed as an uproar of agreement filled the group. He could recall when he'd been one of them, tormenting Astrid for being odd. But he'd never been so cruel, even when the roar of the crowd ensured his mind he was in the right. After all, Fead himself had been the one to cut the branch of the Willow tree that the children of Ascent had so pleasantly strung Astrid up upon. Though he'd never tell her.

They had claimed her evil, and it made things simple. If she was an evil, spiteful thing, then no one else was. And with so many people, adults especially, declaring hatred for the dark haired girl, the claim veiled a simple truth. \_Hurt the girl, or we hurt you.\_

Anyone associated with Astrid was evil.

And that's the way that Fead thought it simply had to be. That is, until his father's charm wore off. In one day, Fead discovered he was half goat from the waist down, had \_hooves\_ of all things, grey horns, and as if it were not bad enough. Blue eyes.

In the same day, he discovered what it meant to lie. And its punishments.

"You're going to \_hang \_me?" Fead blinked, as if shocked by the idea, his voice trembling shakily, "I was one of **\*\*you\*\***!"

"Yeah," The largest boy supposed, shrugging his arms dismissively, as he stepped forward in to the closed ring, glee written across his older face, "Before your coward father got caught for lying and burned alive for it."

His name was Ivor, and Fead had never gotten along particularly well with the blood thirsty brute. Even when they had been on the same side.

"I always thought he smelled rancid.." One of the girls whispered to the other with a spiteful grin directed Fead's way as the ring began guffawing at the snide remark. Loud declarations of agreement rang through the crowd before Ivor raised a hand, frowning in mock alarm, "Don't you see? He's got you all prattling on about nothing! He's stalling! Little **\*\*trickster\*\***!" Ivor spat maliciously.

"Oi!" Astrid bellowed, her blackened and lean form lurking behind Ivor, her chest rising and falling quickly from her run, anger gleaming through her gaze in hatred, "Who're you calling a **\*\*Trickster\*\***? \_Argr?\_" She spat the vile insult with a perfect accent. Ivor's face turned red as he spun upon his heel, charging at the far smaller girl with rage.

"Come at me, \_bro\_." Astrid taunted from a lost age, widening her stance slightly.

Ivor swung his fist wide, only having time to blink shockedly the moment Astrid \_ducked,\_ before she threw a sideways punch his way.

By the time that the painful sound of the hit connecting left the air, Ivor was sprawled into the dirt, spitting out teeth, saliva and blood on his hands and knees, whimpering in panic and pain before he threw a terrified look Astrid's way, the blood clotting in his swelling cheek pooled within his injured eye.

Astrid blinked, looking to her own fist in utter bafflement.

Her knuckles weren't even red.

The children bolted.

Definitions â€" Argr politely means 'coward', and that's being NICE! It means a man is sexually emasculated, unmanned or womanish. Here, Astrid is referancing Lokasenna, as the insult is scattered profusely through the poem.

End  
file.